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“Implacable force...inscrutable intentions...incomprehensible frenzy”:

Ambition, Obsession and Madness in Joseph Conrad’s

Heart of Darkness

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Abstract: This paper explores the intricate and intertwined themes of ambition, obsession, and madness in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. Through a comprehensive analysis of the psyche of the characters, especially that of Kurtz and Marlow, this study highlights the transformative power of ambition and its potential to lead to moral degeneration. By engaging with concepts of civilization versus savagery, restraint versus unruliness, and the existential plight of both colonizers and the colonized, the thesis underscores the pervasive moral ambiguity that defines human ambition and its catastrophic consequences. Certain artistic depictions of these psychological aspects present in the novella, have been included in this paper to visually interpret the intangible, inexplicable and inhuman depths of the human mind.

Keywords: Obsession, Conrad, Ambition, Colonization, Moral, Kurtz, Marlow.

Introduction: “All extremes of feeling are allied with madness.” (112)- is what Virginia Woolf concluded in *Orlando: a Biography*. The politics of ambition has immemorially led to contradictory consequences. Man created fire and God to survive unfathomable darkness, while Prometheus stole fire and violated god’s authority to prove himself superior. Sushruta sliced up bodies to cure inner wounds, and Victor Frankenstein, to claim victory over nature, birthed a monster out of a corpse. The ancient Persians challenged human limitations by training pigeons to carry letters, and Coleridge’s “ancient Mariner” (line 1) brought a curse upon himself as, with his “cross-bow” he shot the albatross, simply because he could. Wings of aspiration make one achieve the highest moral loftiness, but obsession chops those very wings and diminishes the blessing of sanity. *Heart of Darkness* adopts these very themes and delves into the minds of the characters to knock at the closed doors of the unfamiliar parts of their psyche, which they themselves do not dare to explore. The obsessive qualities in Marlow’s pursuit of revelation, the manager’s greed for position, the brickmaker’s trickery for promotion, the two female characters’ hopes for assurance and Kurtz’s fixation “to have kings meet him at railway station” (Conrad 113), prove the practiced human civility to be an occasional episode in the general drama of inborn devilry.

Findings and Discussion: The protagonist Charlie Marlow's shift from childhood ambition to unhealthy obsession on different levels has a remarkable cinematic quality. From growing up with a love for the map and its unexplored territories; to setting out as an inexperienced seafarer as we see in "Youth: a Narrative"; to finally becoming an efficient captain of a steamer, Marlow's silent quest for self-discovery-"what no other man can ever know"(Conrad 46), has been vivified from the beginning of the novella. His unadulterated desire for unravelling deeper truths about life, morality, human nature, the world, and its complexities remains constant. However, his passion for seafaring is doubly energized upon hearing a single name: Kurtz. A man with fantastic speech yet fearful demeanour, civilizing intent yet rumoured dictatorship, an embodiment of the colonizers' dream yet an ominous nightmare of the colonized: Kurtz to Marlow represents "the impenetrable darkness"(Conrad 77) he feels a magnetic attraction towards. The bell that rings within Kurtz at the thought of ivory, reverberates similarly in Marlow regarding Kurtz, echoing a combination of intellectual curiosity, and the symbolic quest to "the heart of an immense darkness" (Conrad 128) of human idealism, moral ambiguity and the devastation inflicted by loss of "restraint". Marlow's character represents Freudian "ego" because, even when ethicality starts slipping through his fingers, his touch with reality is never lost. He is neither the silence nor the crescendo- he is the state of equilibrium as he returns from the verge of becoming one of Eliot's "hollow men" (line 1) who say-

"Let me be no nearer
In death's dream kingdom
Let me also wear
Such deliberate disguises
Rat's coat, crowskin, crossed staves" (lines 29-33)

From being the adventurous Ulysses to becoming the foolish rebel Icarus, Marlow slights his declining health to follow "a voice" (Conrad 78) only in the end, to be gifted with "The horror! The horror!"(Conrad 115) of the reality far removed from all expectations, ambitions and obsessions.

Kurtz: a name that means "short", is the embodiment of sky-shattering mania for power, which leads to his descent into madness. In *Under Western Eyes*, Conrad writes, "The belief in a supernatural source of evil is not necessary; men alone are quite capable of every wickedness" (21). Kurtz becomes the ultimate repository of unparalleled moral degeneration. He initially came to Congo with noble ideals—believing he could bring civilization, enlightenment, and Christian values to the so-called "savages". However, the wilderness, isolation, lack of external moral checks pushes Kurtz to internalize, or rather showcase, a subconscious yearning for bestial despotism, monstrous gluttony, and simply a lunatic surge of plundering ivory. The more of a God he becomes to the savages with the power of gunpowder, fire and brute force, the more his whole existence, like his name, becomes a paradox. Ivory, once a symbol of success, becomes a symbol of his degeneracy and diabolism. The savagery he once sought to eradicate consumes him whole and drags him down to the darkest hole of distorted disillusionment. In *Lord Jim*, Conrad writes, "It is my belief no man ever understands quite his own artful dodges to escape from the grim shadow of self-knowledge." (62). His fixation to leave behind a legacy and, like Satan in *Paradise Lost*, to "reign" in hell, he runs away further into the "blackness" and shrinks into "a vapour exhaled by the earth" (Conrad 108). The Kurtz being taken to the boat is but a dead entity who expired the moment his humanity became extinct due to his own chokehold of greed. What remained is a faint cry: "My intended, my ivory, my station, my career, my ideas." (Conrad 113).

While the ambitions and obsession of the male characters were built on some plain of reality, those of the two female characters- Kurtz's intended and his African mistress, were built up on lies, empty promises, and impossible desires. While their ambitions were more innocent and valid, at the end of

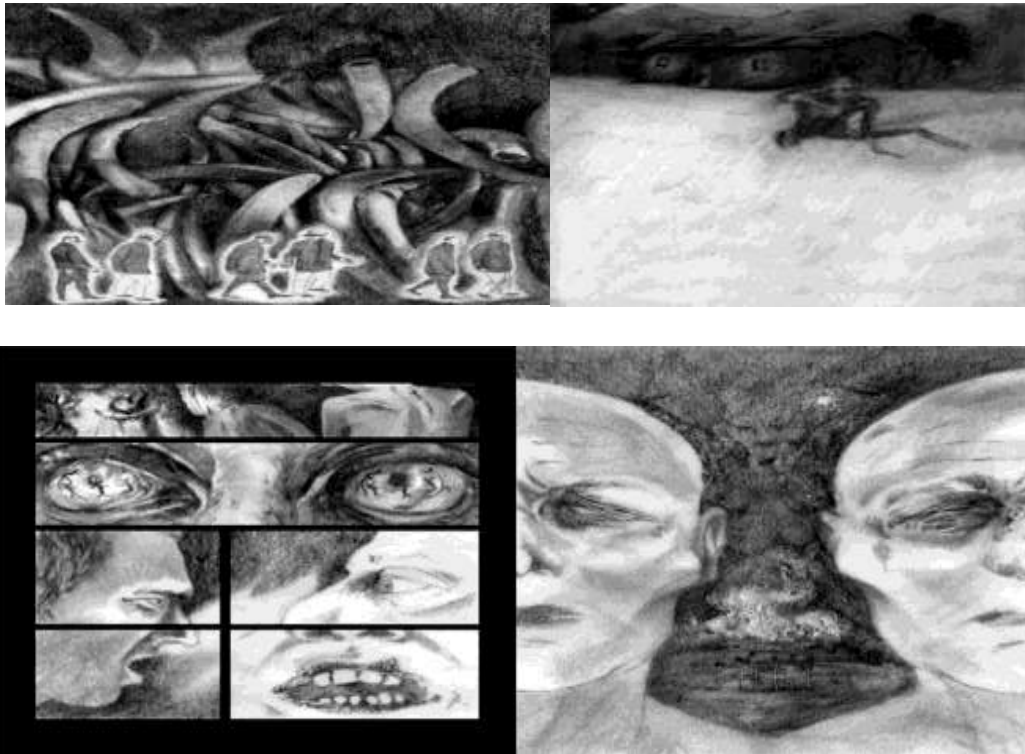
the narrative, both of them exist as nameless, relational creatures to Kurtz and their dreams find no absolute closure: neither complete disillusionment, nor fulfilment. Their fates have been hinted at but not discussed further, keeping them hanging, perhaps forever, in a silver lining of hope strewn by the man with the blackest intent. Their unknown end resonates with Eliot's lines in *The Waste Land*:

“He who was living is now dead
We who were living are now dying
With a little patience.” (8)

The African mistress, exploited for satiating Kurtz's carnal desires, is denied a single reply from him when she both verbalizes and gesticulates her need for an answer. For the mere sight of him, she disregards the dangers of gunshots as she advances towards the steamer. Though the reason for her obsession with Kurtz has not been clearly stated in the novella, one thing is clarified: whether it was protection, status, acknowledgement or affection that she sought, her hopes only left her orphaned in a fool's paradise, suffering alone with her “wild sorrow and dumb pain” (Conrad 100). To label the emotions of Kurtz's intended as obsession, the much-justified tenets of romantic bond, conjugal promise, loyalty and commitment would have to be questioned. Her existential nourishment lies in wholeheartedly believing in Kurtz's noble ideals, exemplary personality, capability, his pledged love and the fact that she “knew him the best” (Conrad 124) and was so significant a part of his life that his last thoughts were of her. The way she naively waits, genuinely mourns, heartily loves and bursts into blameless triumph after hearing Marlow's lie, proves Marlow's idea that women live in an alternative, ignorant reality. But realistically, her fictitious world is at least a sane one. While Kurtz's false, weak resistance to the true horrors makes him fall apart, her true, untainted faith in a false reality is what keeps her alive, as she nurtures an unreal man's fictional words for life.

Achebe, in *Things Fall Apart*, explains the psychological foundation behind the justification of colonial exploitation in a single, simple line: “The world has no end, and what is good among one people is an abomination with others” (66). Conrad equally presents the theme of obsession through raw ideological concepts: imperial exploration, colonization, otherization, white man's burden and above all, racism, on which all of the previous doctrines sharpen their carnivorous teeth. The sole reason behind rationalizing invasion as a civilized mission was to claim superiority over those presumed to be eternally inferior by the Europeans and hence, to justify oppression, exploitation, dehumanization, violence, manipulation and ultimate degradation. Compared to the psychological, barbarous thirst of the colonizers that assures them of false omnipotence in domination, omnipresence in expansion and omniscience in judgement; the necessary, cannibalistic hunger of the natives when they demand: “Catch ‘im. Give ‘im to us... Eat ‘im” (Conrad 65) sounds harmless. Racism, hence, is the core seed of poison ivy that invades, from the personal to the collective, and results in centuries of incurable moral ailment. All it takes is a single note – “Exterminate all the brutes” (Conrad 82), to negate the whole existence of the native “savages”, “cannibals”, “animals”, “apparitions”, “fool-niggers”.

The artfulness of the human mind portrayed through artistic representations reveals a plethora of sketches, paintings, and digital prints based on *Heart of Darkness*: most of them being recently published, which makes us wonder how a novel written in 1899 and dealing with overreaching ambition has inspired artists into ambitious creation.



Catherine Anyango Grünewald's ink and charcoal sketches of *Heart of Darkness* are an accurate visual representation of the literal darkness looming throughout the novella. Just the way unhealthy ambition hazes over one's morality, her sketches too depict the characters in blurred, disproportionate forms set against a dystopian backdrop. The first sketch (from left) showcases sets of characters, including Marlow, the manager and other company officials, moving yet stagnant, preyed on behind their backs by their own twisted needs, shaped as grotesque, predatory tentacles. The second one shows the animalistic figure of Kurtz, lost physically and mentally in the darkness. The white man has been devoured by the black. The third illustration draws a comparison between Marlow and Kurtz, the former on the verge of insanity, the latter, too far gone. The one on the right captures the moment of Kurtz's passing away as the faint shadow of an old lady standing in the middle, representing Atropos, is severing the tangled strings of his fate, which he himself complicated.



On the contrary, Matt Kish's illustrated version of *Heart of Darkness* unfolds a surrealistic portrayal of the novel. Instead of conventional black and white, he uses bright, neon colours (mostly green and yellow) that are equally blinding and unsettling. The characters are drawn in black and white as incongruous figures, much exposing their true nature. From left, the first illustration portrays colonization as a grey, lifeless, godlike figure who, in the redeemer posture of Christ, is actually bringing down hellfire upon the colonized, reducing them to a mere heap of burnt skulls. The promise of enlightenment becomes the curse of the engulfing fire of greed. The second one explains the fate of the natives of Congo, having been exploited to death, and even as ghosts, they are shackled and crippled under the crooked, magnanimous, beastly jaws of the colonizers. The last one portrays Kurtz as a skeletal being, malnourished due to his own gluttony, just like the hungry, mad snake eating its own flesh, coiling around his figure.



Bethany White and Sean McSorley both play with the connotations of colours in their representation of Kurtz. Bethany White inverts the binary of racial supremacy by defining white as the colour of morbidity. In the first image on the left, the ghastly white skin of Kurtz's corpse no longer reflects racial supremacy but rather sickness, dullness, paleness and lastly lifelessness. Sean McSorley paints Kurtz as a bloodied silhouette (image on the right), forever stained in the blood of innocents, surrounded but secluded, at the centre of attention but always highlighted as the tyrannical dictator. The whiteness of his skin is covered in red, while the blood-drained natives look whiter than any white man.

Conclusion: Like truths universally acknowledged, *Heart of Darkness* features unchecked ambition and insatiable obsessions as two of the many hideous inhabitants of the Freudian “id” or the fourth unit of the Johari window, where one's own self is unknown. These themes become forces of ethical autopsy that expose such blinding darkness the human mind possesses, that no dazzle of civilization can ever illuminate. It can only be repressed. Marlow's Dantean passage to the innermost chamber of a cognitive inferno leading to Kurtz: the very “flower” of western civilization, all scattered petal by petal, long wilted yet like the delirious Tantalus running after a self-imposed illusion, creates a face-to-face mirror image before us. With the understanding that the line between what we are and what we actually can be is so thin, the awareness arises that we, might at any moment, let loose the witches in our mind to cackle, conjure and plot: “When shall we three meet again?” (Shakespeare, 1.1), in fear, death or unceasing pain?

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